

Jeffco decides to settle discrimination dispute

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JEFFERSON COUNTY — The county has paid a former department head \$130,000 — about double his annual salary — to avoid a racial discrimination lawsuit, county officials confirmed Thursday.

James Ellis resigned last month as director of emergency management after reaching an agreement that included the payout and a provision not to sue the county. He claims to have been the highest-ranking African-American ever employed by the county.

His attorney, Todd McNamara, released a statement Thursday accusing the county of "discriminatory management practices" that have "eaten away the very core of Jefferson County."

Ellis was head of the land planning and infrastructure division, but department realignments last year shut down the division and he was transferred to emergency management with a \$15,000 cut in pay.

The pay cut and "demotion" were racially motivated, according to Ellis.

"It is a failure of anyone on a management level . . . (that does) not recognize that the face of the best and the brightest does not have one color, one gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation," Ellis said in the prepared statement. He was out of town and could not be reached for comment.

County Administrator Ron Holliday said he was confident the coun-

ty could have won any lawsuit, but it made more economic sense to settle out of court.

"Mr. Ellis had threatened to sue the county," he said. "And we made an economic decision."

But McNamara said the settlement shows the county was racist in its treatment of Ellis, a 13-year county employee.

"You don't pay \$130,000 to settle a claim that doesn't have substantial merit," McNamara said. "There is no doubt in our minds that the decision to demote him . . . was racially motivated."

"Unfortunately, I think the county likes its workforce to reflect its population, which is about entirely white," McNamara said.

Furthermore, Ellis claims that the county's affirmative action program is nothing more than a magnet for federal dollars.

"If you did happen to find a copy of the affirmative action plan, you would find a tribute to disparate treatment of minorities," he said.

Holliday said minorities account for about 10 percent of the county's 2,400 employees, which is in line with the county's population make-up.

The county administrator also questioned the timing of Thursday's release. "That we are still having to deal with this, this is the kind of situation that just gets so weary," he said.

Holliday contends that Ellis' claims are exaggerated.

"He's not in touch with the reality of his qualifications and his performance capability," he said.